

News focus

Ashes to ashes

This spring sees the return of aboriginal bones from the Natural History Museum in London to Tasmania, sparking concerns from researchers.

Nigel Williams reports.

The Natural History Museum in London is to return the remains of 18 aboriginal people to the Australian government. The remains include the skull of an aboriginal person thought to have been illegally exported to Britain in 1913.

The rest comprise the remains of 17 indigenous individuals from Tasmania and will be returned after a three-month period of study by scientists.

Museum director Michael Dixon said the move was “a common sense one” but accepted there would be objections. “We are a science-based organisation but we do not believe that the scientific value should trump all other claims, nor do we believe that the ethical, religious, and spiritual claims should necessarily

trump the scientific value,” he said.

Australian aborigines have long campaigned for the repatriation of human remains held in British museums and universities. Many regard such collections as an affront to their customs and spiritual way of life. The Tasmanian materials were largely collected in the 19th century by George Augustus Robinson.

After his death, the remains were passed into the possession of other individuals and eventually deposited in UK institutions, and then gradually brought under the keeping of the Natural History Museum.

They will now be given, through the Australian government, to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, which has been in dispute over

the matter for more than 20 years.

Despite their sometimes dubious original acquisition, the materials are of great interest to modern-day scientists for what they can reveal about human variation and evolution.

It is expected that on return, the specimens are likely to be cremated.

“These were collected at a time when the aboriginal population of Tasmania had not had substantial contact with Europeans, and therefore the value of these remains scientifically is that they give us a point in time for the development of aboriginal populations,” said Richard Lane, the NHM director of science.

“We know from these and other materials that the populations of aborigines on Tasmania are actually really quite different to mainland Australia.”



Custodian: The Natural History Museum in London is returning human remains to their place of origin. (Photo: Natural History Museum)

The move to repatriate certain materials held in UK collections follows several years of discussions which ended in legislative changes and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport issuing guidelines on how claims should be handled. At the Natural History Museum this has led to the creation of a special panel to assess the merits of each request.

Georgina Mace, a member of the panel, said the decision to allow three months of scientific tests on the Tasmanian remains before their repatriation represented a fair compromise between the desire of the Tasmanians to regain the materials and the wish of scientists to retain them for investigation.

"Part of the compromise is that we will try to gain as much knowledge as possible but we are very pleased to be able to return these items to the people who feel very strongly that they shouldn't be here".

The data collection process, beginning this month, will include imaging, measurements, and DNA and isotopic analysis. Researchers say that by applying such techniques, they can use old bones to discern patterns of migration in human communities — who lived, who mixed with whom and when — and even follow the spread of disease.

The chemistry of bones will often record how an individual lived — and died. For example, different isotopes of carbon and nitrogen in teeth reveal the diet of a person, with vegetarians displaying a very different isotopic signature to an individual who eats meat or fish.

The NHM holds the British national collection of human remains, comprising almost 20,000 specimens. They represent a worldwide distribution of the human population and a timescale of 500,000 years. The majority of the collection (54%) is material from individuals in the UK. But there are hundreds of items which could, and almost certainly will, be subject to further claims for repatriation by indigenous groups in Australia, New Zealand and North America.

Creation pressure

It's just two years from the double Darwin anniversary, but detractors are keeping up the pressure. **Nigel Williams** reports.

Several schools in Darwin's home country are using creationist teaching materials condemned by the UK government as "not appropriate to support the science curriculum", according to recent press reports.

The pack sent to schools promotes the creationist alternative to Darwinian evolution in the form of 'intelligent design' and the group behind them said 59 schools are using the information as a "useful classroom resource".

A teacher at one of the schools said it intended to use the DVDs to present intelligent design as an alternative to Darwinism. Nick Cowan, head of chemistry at Bluecoat School in Liverpool, said: "Just because it takes a negative look at Darwinism doesn't mean it is not science. I think to critique Darwinism is quite appropriate."

But the government has made clear that neither "intelligent design nor creationism are recognised as scientific theories". The chairman of the parliamentary science and technology select committee, Phil Willis, said he was alarmed that these packs were being used in schools.

"I am flabbergasted that any head of science would give credence to this creationist theory and be prepared to put it alongside Darwinism", he said. "Treating it as an alternative centralist theory alongside Darwinism in science lessons is deeply worrying."

The teaching pack, which includes two DVDs and a manual, was sent to the head of science at all secondary schools in the country on September 18 by the group Truth in Science. The enclosed feedback postcard was returned by 89 schools. As well as 59 positive responses, 15 were negative or dismissive and 15 said the material was "not suitable".

"We are not attacking the teaching of Darwinian theory," said Richard Buggs, a member of Truth in Science. "We are just saying that criticism of Darwin should also be taught."

"Intelligent design looks at empirical evidence in the natural world and says, 'This is evidence of a designer'. If you go any further the argument does become religious and intelligent design does have religious implications," said Buggs.

But leading scientists argue that Intelligent design is not science because it invokes supernatural causes. "There is just no evidence for intelligent design, it is pure religion and has nothing to do with science. It should be banned from science classes", said developmental biologist Lewis Wolpert, at the University of London who is also vice-president of the British Humanist Association.

The DVDs were produced in America and feature figures linked to the Discovery Institute in Seattle, a think-tank that has made concerted efforts to promote intelligent design and insert it into high-school science lessons in the US.

Last year a judge in Dover, Pennsylvania, ruled that intelligent design could not be taught in science lessons. "Intelligent design is a religious view, a mere relabelling of creationism, and not a scientific theory", he wrote in his judgement.

It is not clear exactly how many UK schools are using the Truth in Science material, or how it is being used. The government has made it clear the Truth in Science materials should not be used in science lessons. In response to a question by the Labour MP Graham Stringer, Jim Knight, a minister in the Department for Education, wrote: "neither intelligent design nor creationism are recognised scientific theories and they are not included in the science curriculum."

Physicist Andy McIntosh, at the University of Leeds, who is on the board of Truth in Science, said: "We are just simply a group of people who have put together... a different case."